Editorial

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active learning in higher education

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EDITORIAL

Higher education, it is said, is suffering something of an identity crisis given the changing landscape. Many would say that the changes over the last ten years or so have been faster and more far-reaching than at any other period of time in the past. 'Fast' and 'far-reaching' are neither simple to describe nor easy to measure. Being 'fast' at the age of five in the egg and spoon race at school is a very different 'fast' from that of winning the 100 m at the Olympics. That said, each can be measured fairly easily; in seconds – or minutes, perhaps, for the egg and spoon race! It is thus fairly easy to say that child/runner A is faster than child/runner B; we can use a stopwatch to measure the performances of each participant in the race. 'Fast' – and thus 'faster' – in terms of change in higher education is, however, a different thing altogether, given that it is a difficult thing to measure, and much is subjective and context-dependent. The 'stopwatch' used seems often to be our perceptions of change itself; a great deal of change in a short(er) period of time (whatever 'a great deal' and 'short' mean) is for many uncomfortable. It also depends on viewpoint/level. At one level we might say that higher education has not changed at all; students come into higher education and we, as educators, help them to learn. This was as true 50, or 500, years ago as it is today. For those who are more focused on this 'bigger picture' view of higher education, that there are far greater numbers of students entering higher education these days is seen as a change, but a small one. For those who are more focused on what is happening on a more day-to-day basis, this change is enormous.

Whether we consider the increase in student numbers as a big or a small change, none will disagree about its impact: a greater student population means, practically speaking, larger class sizes for most of us. The definition of 'large class sizes' is similarly subjective and context-dependent: 'large', to some, can be a class of 50 students, whereas to others a class of 'only' 50 students is a rare thing. There are many of us who are regularly in classrooms where 750 students cannot now be squeezed into lecture theatres designed for 'large groups' of 400; the 750 have to be split into two 'small' groups of around 375 or so, with the lecturer delivering the same lecture twice. This is the case, at least, in the UK, where funding for universities is government-controlled and diminishing year on year, and thus institutions have to weigh up whether or not the funds should be used for infrastructure

such as new lecture theatres or whether to finance something else instead, such as student accommodation. A new lecture block is very expensive, and even if there is space on campus (and in big cities, such as central London, there is little, if any), it is a matter of weighing up the priorities for investment. How big or small a change we are witnessing in higher education also depends on how long we have worked in it; those who entered, say, only a year ago, are likely to view change differently from, say, those who have been teaching for 20 years and who thus have far longer experience on which to base their judgement. Whether we feel comfortable (happy) to be working, and shaping, the higher education environment in which both we and our students work and learn depends for the most part on how we, as individuals, view the world about us. There are, however, some factors/facts which, at some level or in some way or another, affect how we work and learn in higher education these days.

One such factor is the technology that is now available to support our students' learning. There is no university that does not have a campus-wide computer-based learning (CBL) tool of one type or another. The need for any debate as to whether computers are a good thing or not, and whether we should adopt their use, has long been unnecessary. CBL tools are, like the blackboard (and then the whiteboard) before them, merely tools, and if used appropriately, can aid both the learning and the teaching (two different things). Whilst this debate might have been relevant some ten years ago, when computing technology was being introduced, its ubiquity, and the fact that it is merely a support/aid, needs no discussion today. Using CBL might well be new for an individual educator in a particular context/institution, and there are many of us who are less than keen to use it, or to use it to its full potential, anyway, given that for many, technology is still somewhat 'scary'. However, that it is new for an individual educator in a particular context/institution does not make it new per se. It is neither novel nor new; it is instead standard, normal, and our learners today expect it (there is vociferous complaint when it is available but not used by individual educators!).

For those of us teaching large classes, it might be argued that there is a greater incentive for us to harness the benefits of computing technology. However, harnessing such technology in 'the digital age' in the context of the classroom is not without its challenges, as can be seen in the first article, entitled 'Central issues in the use of computer-based materials for high volume entrepreneurship education'. In this, Billy Cooper reports that for some of us, the use of CBL tools might involve only the loading up of lecture notes. Whilst this has the advantage of making these available to all (some students may have had very good reason to have been absent and may be off campus), it might be argued that this is trying to replicate the 'normal' classroom (rather than handing out the notes in class, we make them available online

instead, or in addition). However, such is CBL technology that those with sufficient expertise can have available for their learners highly sophisticated programs such as game software, as the author notes. In the discussion of the benefits and disadvantages of CBL tools, the research described in the article looks, among other things, at the potential 'mismatch(es)' between what learners want and expect, and what the technology actually delivers. Students in the study described were asked to rate their preference(s) for either a multimedia presentation of content-related material or the on-screen text version of the same. The author cites literature which suggests that there is no significant difference between the two, yet the results of the author's study reveal a significant difference in student preference, suggesting that there is much more work to be done in this area. The article concludes with some useful recommendations for those of us who may be considering the introduction or improvement of CBL in their own institutions. The author concludes by saying that 'it is largely irrelevant' as to whether the technology we use to deliver the material is via 'CD ROM, hard drive based software, server-based network-distributed, or globally distributed software via Internet connectivity [and that] while there are technical issues of difference, the learning issues remain relevant' (p. 216). The author is spot on here; the issue is not with the technology itself, although many of us will have to learn how to use it, or how to use it more effectively, but instead with the focus on the *learning*, not the teaching.

Comparing, although not the comparison of the 'old' with the 'new', is a theme in the second article, 'Effects of performance assessment on the achievement and motivation of graduate students', by Dawson R. Hancock, from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, USA. As assessment is so vital an aspect of our work in higher education given its impact on our students' performance and, ultimately, the award that they receive as a result of that performance, the assessment methods that we choose to use need our careful consideration. The author describes two commonly-used methods, namely, those which are termed 'selected response' and those termed 'constructed response'. As the name suggests, the former means that the student being assessed must choose a response (or more) from a range of possible responses. In contrast, the latter involves the student having to provide their own response to the question. Amongst the choices available to us in terms of asking our students to provide their own responses to the questions is to ask them to perform an activity of one sort or another in front of the assessor. Common and much-used, naturally enough, in disciplines such as the performing arts, the advantages and drawbacks of such performance-based tasks are outlined. Of particular interest to the study described in the article is the effect(s) of such an assessment on motivation and achievement. In the study, two groups of students on the same course

were taught in the same manner but assessed differently; neither group knew of this difference. Of note is that this study focuses not only on motivation but also on achievement; how students actually perform following a particular intervention of one sort or another is often lacking in studies. Much of the literature contains studies which report students' perceptions, that is, whether or in what ways they *believe* it may have impacted their learning. However, what we believe may, or may not, reflect our actual behaviour which, in this case, means performance on task. As can be seen from the results, the different assessment tasks impacted, in significantly different ways, the learners' motivation and achievement.

With 750 students in a class, how often, and in what ways, such assessment can be used needs careful consideration; all impact not only on the learner but also those who set and mark assessments. The benefits of utilizing technology in classrooms with 750 students or more is readily apparent and, as stated earlier, all universities now have a campus-wide computer-based learning (CBL) tool of one type or another. Far less common, in the UK at least, is the use of audience response systems (ARS). As the authors of the third article, 'Empowering or compelling reluctant participators using response systems' say, these have recently become available as off-the-shelf products which can easily be used with commonly-used packages such as PowerPoint and the like. In this article, Charles R. Graham et al., from Brigham Young University, USA, describe the pros and cons of audience response systems, noting that one of the technology's most notable benefits is that its use makes it far more likely that the shy and/or reluctant learner will participate. However, the authors argue that whilst there is much literature which attests to the benefits for learners, there has been insufficient attention paid to learners they term as 'reluctant participators'; an important sub-group of the class. While many researchers seek to find evidence to support great(er) use of technology, including ARS, of note here is that students were asked what aspects of the technology were *not* helpful/useful to them. Their use as a means of testing/assessing students was, unsurprisingly, one such negative given the apparent technical difficulties. Another was that teachers used the tool as a means of checking attendance, and penalized (by deducting marks) those who did not attend. Students were also unimpressed by being given marks for wrong (rather than right) answers to quizzes based on reading that they had done earlier/before the class. As the quote from one of the students aptly put it, the use of ARS seemed to be determined not by its value/use to the *student* but instead to reduce the amount of marking for the *teacher*.

Whether the case or not, the article highlights why we should make more use of audience response systems than is currently the case, namely, that they allow for more/better participation in class and that students can immediately assess their own knowledge and/or performance. Often unavailable to

students via 'standard' classroom practice are the 'opinions and attitudes' of their peers, as the authors point out. In a large class, but even in a small one, without such technology it is very difficult indeed to find out what everyone else in the room thinks; all that is normally heard is the voice of those who speak out, and these are, by definition, a tiny minority and these may not be representative of the whole cohort. Whilst not cheap (the respondents highlighted this as one of its main drawbacks), appropriate use of this technology could reap great rewards for both teacher and learner.

Feelings of isolation, not belonging, being different ('worse') are perhaps most keenly felt by those in *any* new environment, including that of being a new student (or a new lecturer). 'New' is often 'scary', however self-confident we might be in other areas of our lives. Finding yourself in a classroom full of 750 students (as nerve-wracking for the new lecturer as for the new student, in most cases) and a myriad of other factors make the transition from school to university a difficult period for most, if not all. It is not surprising, then, that the vast majority of students who drop out of university do so in their first year.

As the authors of the fourth article, entitled 'Skills, learning styles and success of first-year undergraduates' rightly say, attrition has recently been high profile in the literature, not least because of the significant growth of students coming into higher education in the UK and thus the greater number who drop out. Whilst the actual number/percentage is very low indeed, at least in the UK, Judy Goldfinch and Moira Hughes make the interesting point that we have to date been overly keen to attribute the reason for dropping out to some sort of 'problem' with the student, that is, they drop out because of personal circumstances and/or some lack of ability. Drawing on the literature on assimilation, that is, 'fit', the authors draw our attention to the two, differing views of this important aspect of higher education. One, students have to fit into the institution and its practices, norms and values. Two, that institutions need to change in order to better match the needs of what is seen as an increasingly diverse student population. By overly focusing on the personal circumstances of students themselves, we are in essence saying that they have in some way failed to 'fit' into our institution. However, it may perhaps be the case that the opposite is a more common reason for students dropping out, namely, that we have in some way failed to adapt and that there are changes that we need to make in order to better accommodate our students' personal circumstances and/or abilities. The authors rightly say that much previous work looking at why students drop out has been gathered from those who actually did so. The study described in the article gathered data not only from staff but also from those who had considered leaving but instead remained. The article concludes with a thought-provoking overview of what we are currently trying to do, that is, to address what we perceive as 'deficits' in our students. As the authors

rightly say, given our 'enormous effort and energy' we should instead be focusing our attention on issues which are to a great extent within our control to change, such as providing better guidance for students on assignments, in order to improve the student experience.

Confidence, so vital an aspect of whatever we do, is yet another factor which comes sharply into focus for those coming into higher education, whether as new students or members of staff. However, too much confidence can cause us as much difficulty as too little, as the study described in the fifth and final article demonstrates. In their article entitled 'Conceptions of early leaving: a comparison of the views of teaching staff and students', Pat Young, Margaret Glogowska and Lesley Lockyer report that many students come into higher education with the belief that their skills in certain key areas are better than they actually are. In the study described, skills such as time management, teamwork and self-reliance are looked at in relation not only to the amount of confidence that students have in these when they enter but also the correlation between these and their eventual success. This is further complicated by learning style, gender, age and type of task, naturally enough, and the article discusses each of these in relation to both confidence and success. In order to increase retention but also to improve the experiences of our first-year students, the results of the study lead the authors to ask whether we should, for example, concentrate on helping our students to develop better time management skills, or provide earlier formative assessment in skills related to written communication. The authors conclude their article with a useful section detailing the implications for practice, and direct us to further ideas for adoption in our classrooms. It is evident from this article that the authors echo the comments of Judy Goldfinch and Moira Hughes, above, in that they ask what changes *we* might make in order to better assist our learners in their learning – and that there is much that we can, and should, do. Change may be uncomfortable for some, whether for a student or a lecturer, but without change it is absolutely certain that there cannot be improvement. Naturally enough, it is also the case that change can make things worse, which might perhaps explain why there is often reluctance, if not fear of change. However, there can surely be no 'risk' involved in, say, providing better guidance for students on assignments (a suggestion made by the authors of the fourth article). Being neither over- nor under-confident, we should examine our practices and, in our efforts to improve the student experience, change what *we* do. As it is impossible to change others (we can change only ourselves), we can in any case do nothing other.